

THE CASE AGAINST EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM:  
REPLIES TO ROSEN AND NETA

ABSTRACT

Unlike the relativistic theses drawn from physics, normative relativisms involve relativization not to frames of reference but to something like *our standards*, standards that we have to be able to think of ourselves as endorsing or accepting. Thus, moral facts are to be relativized to moral standards and epistemic facts to epistemic standards. But a moral standard in this sense would appear to be just a general moral proposition and an epistemic standard just a general epistemic proposition. Pulling off either relativism, then, requires not just relativizing the facts in the domain in question to the relevant standards; it requires taking a non-absolutist view of the standards themselves. Otherwise a commitment to absolute truths in the domain in question will show up in one's attitude towards the standards themselves. But it is very hard to see how to take a genuinely non-absolutist attitude towards the standards themselves. That, in essence, is the difficulty for a relativistic view of a normative domain that I tried to develop in Chapter 6 of *Fear of Knowledge*. In their commentaries, Gideon Rosen and Ram Neta come up with ingenious ways of attempting to circumvent that difficulty. In my reply, I try to explain why I don't believe they succeed.

Both of my commentators focus their remarks on the arguments in Chapter 6 of *Fear of Knowledge* (Boghossian 2006), arguments that are directed against the cogency of epistemic relativism. I am glad. Having aimed to write a short and accessible book that deals with weighty matters, I had to compress almost everything in *Fear*, perhaps especially so the arguments of Chapter 6. These thoughtful critiques by Ram Neta and Gideon Rosen give me a welcome opportunity to think these issues through further. It will prove useful to start by responding to Rosen's remarks before moving on to Neta's.

REPLY TO ROSEN

I

Rosen gives a characteristically accurate account of my arguments and a characteristically inventive set of responses to them.

The intuitive idea behind epistemic relativism, as I characterize it, is that there are no absolute facts about what justifies what; and, hence, that a particular judgment about

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whether some belief is justified by some item of information (or total informational state) is never simply true or false. At best it is true or false relative to an epistemic system – a framework of epistemic principles. More precisely, epistemic relativism, as I understand it, consists in the following three theses:

(ER<sub>1</sub>) There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies. (Epistemic non-absolutism)

(ER<sub>2</sub>) If a person, S's, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form 'E justifies belief B' as expressing the claims *E justifies belief B* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to the epistemic system C (that I, S, accept) E justifies belief B.* (Epistemic Relationism)

(ER<sub>3</sub>) There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic Pluralism)

As Rosen notes, the proponent of any such view owes us answers to three questions:

- (a) What is an epistemic system?
- (b) What is it for an epistemic claim to be true or false relative to such a system?

and

- (c) What is it for a person to accept an epistemic system?

And the most natural package of answers to these questions begins with the claim that an epistemic system consists of general propositions of the form:

- (1) For all e, h: e justifies h iff f(e,h).

The relativist can then say, in answer to (b), that a *particular* statement of the form 'e justifies h' (e.g., Galileo's observations justify Copernicanism) is true relative to such a system just in case that system, along with the epistemic facts, *entails* 'e justifies h'. And he can also say, in answer to (c), that to *accept* an epistemic system is to believe that its ingredient epistemic principles are true.

As I argue in Chapter 6, however, this natural package of answers won't do. Although it seems to capture what some prominent relativists, like Richard Rorty, have said, it does not lead to a reflectively tenable position.

The trouble is that propositions of the form (1) seem to be complete truth-evaluable propositions that state the conditions under which a belief would be absolutely justified. It is, therefore, not open to the relativist to say that he *believes* these propositions to be true, since it is a non-negotiable part of his view that no (unrelativized) epistemic principle is ever simply true.

In *Fear*, I consider two other options on behalf of the relativist. The first says that epistemic systems are composed of propositions of the form (1) but that these are *incomplete* propositions, akin to the way that

Tom is taller than...

is incomplete. And the second says that epistemic systems are composed not of propositions at all but rather of imperatives, contents of the form:

If C, do A!

And I argue that they are not satisfactory either. On the assumption that there are no other worthwhile contenders, I conclude that there is nothing very coherent for epistemic relativism to be.<sup>1</sup>

Rosen's view is that matters are not so bleak for the relativist, that although there may be nothing to recommend his view, it is possible to come up with a coherent formulation of its main tenets.

His strategy is to pick the incomplete propositions option and attempt to show that the various problems that I raise for it can be satisfactorily resolved. What are those problems?

## II

One problem I raise for the incomplete propositions strategy is the *entailment* problem. If

'S's being true relative to (epistemic system) C'

is to be explained as

'S's being entailed by C (along with the relevant non-epistemic facts)'

I asked how we could make sense of valid entailments between sets of incomplete propositions. The trouble is that, since an incomplete proposition is never true, the criterion that a valid argument should preserve truth is always vacuously satisfied.

Rosen offers a response. C, along with facts  $f_1, \dots, f_n$ , entail S, he says, just in case this argument has a formally valid corresponding schematic argument, in which the epistemic words have been replaced by dummy letters; and an argument is formally valid just in case any interpretation that verifies the premises also verifies the conclusion.

In effect, Rosen is suggesting that we could take an inference involving incomplete propositions to be valid if the inference that would result from replacing the unsaturated predicates with saturated ones would come out valid.

We could certainly introduce such a notion of "valid entailment" if we wanted

to. Why it should count as a genuine notion of valid entailment is unclear to me, given that we are dealing with incomplete propositions, for which truth preservation is always vacuously satisfied. But I am willing to grant it for the sake of argument. The main problems for epistemic relativism lie elsewhere.

### III

The first of these is that an epistemic system is supposed to constitute a *conception* of epistemic justification, one among many “equally correct” such conceptions. However, if the propositions that are supposed to make up such a system are incomplete propositions, akin to the way in which ‘*Tom is taller than...*’ is just a proposition fragment, then it is hard to see how an epistemic system could constitute a conception of anything, let alone one of epistemic justification. Rosen doesn’t address this worry.

The second and more important problem is that it is hard to see how the reflective relativist could explain how he could *accept* an epistemic system, if, according to him, it consists in a set of incomplete propositions. It seems as though we can no more accept a set of propositions that we know to be incomplete proposition fragments than we can accept a set of propositions that we know to be false (the original worry).

Rosen has many interesting things to say about this acceptance problem. He agrees with me that it is not possible to explain the acceptance of an epistemic system in terms of belief. What, then, could it be if not belief? He writes:

Boghossian only considers one possibility. He imagines that the relativist might identify the acceptance of a system with the endorsement of certain *imperatives* associated with that system. If the system consists in statements of the form

E justifies B

then the associated imperatives might be those of the form

If E, believe B!

... To accept an epistemic system on this view is to commit oneself to these associated imperatives for revising one’s opinion in response to evidence. (Rosen, this issue, 15–16)

Rosen then proceeds to defend the viability of this view.

Before turning to his arguments, I should briefly remark that I don’t consider quite the view that Rosen attributes to me. When I invoke imperatives, I don’t do so in the context of fleshing out the incomplete propositions strategy but rather by way of developing a stand-alone conception of an epistemic system. I consider the idea that the relativist might think of an epistemic system as consisting in imperatives rather than in propositions of any kind, complete or incomplete.

I am inclined to think that my version of the imperatival strategy is better than Rosen’s in the sense that it gives the relativist a somewhat stronger hand to play. Mine has the advantage of not requiring the relativist to say how a set of incomplete

propositions could constitute a conception of epistemic justification; or to explain what it could ultimately mean to reflectively accept a set of incomplete proposition fragments, even if one could motivate saying that the solution is to be found by considering imperatives. Rosen's has the advantage of respecting the fact that standards in general are most intuitively thought of in propositional terms – although the fact that the propositions have to be incomplete hugely diminishes that advantage.

In any case, I will consider Rosen's interesting proposal in its own right, making whatever small adaptations might be required to translate my objections to the proposal I do consider into objections to his.

#### IV

According to Rosen's proposal, when we say that Galileo accepts an epistemic system, C, we mean that he's committed to the system of imperatives or rules for belief revision associated with that system in the way explained above. Rosen then goes on to rebut the three distinct objections that I raise for the imperatival strategy.

My first objection proceeds from the observation that most epistemic judgments of the form

- (2) If for some e,  $f(e, h)$  then h is justified

amount to saying that e rationally *permits* belief in h, not that e *requires* belief in h. I don't deny that we do sometimes judge that the evidence rationally requires a given belief. My claim was only that many of our epistemic judgments are judgments of permission rather than obligation.

Now, the problem that this poses for the imperatival strategy is that it's hard to see how to capture a norm of permission in imperatival terms. An imperative of the form

- (3) If for some e,  $f(e, h)$ , then believe h!

requires belief in h given e and doesn't merely permit it.

Rosen says that it is easy for the imperativalist to respond. All he has to do is invoke certain complex imperatives with disjunctive consequents. Thus, he says, the imperative that corresponds to an epistemic norm of permission would be something more like this:

- (4) If for some e,  $f(e, h)$ , then either believe h (on the basis of e), or suspend judgment; but don't believe not-h (on the basis of e).

It seems to me quite clear that (2) and (4) are very different in import.

Let me first get rid of the potentially distracting clause about not believing not-h on the basis of e. This further injunction might follow from further normative principles

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– for example, from the claim that one ought not to believe both  $p$  and not- $p$  – but it is clearly not part of the original judgment. So we should really consider an imperative that is more like:

- (5) If for some  $e$ ,  $f(e, h)$ , then either believe  $h$  (on the basis of  $e$ ), or suspend judgment about  $h$ .

Now, I take it that “suspending judgment” about  $h$  isn’t the same as simply not believing  $h$ ; otherwise (5) would amount simply to prescribing that you do *something* in response to  $e$ . Suspending judgment presumably requires something like considering whether  $h$  and then rejecting taking a view on the matter.

If that’s right, though, (5) now seems to call for you to do things that go well beyond what (2) says, which is simply that if a certain kind of evidence is available, then, *if* you believed  $h$  on its basis, that belief would be OK. (2) doesn’t say that you should believe  $h$ . It doesn’t even say that you should consider whether  $h$ . It doesn’t say that you should do anything.

In other words, (5) is most naturally seen not as the imperatival counterpart of the norm of permission formulated in (2) but as the imperatival counterpart of the norm of *requirement* formulated in

- (6) If for some  $e$ ,  $f(e, h)$ , then you are required either to believe  $h$  (on the basis of  $e$ ) or to suspend judgment on  $h$ .

And (6) is very different from (2).

To accommodate this point, we could try substituting (7) for (5):

- (7) If for some  $e$ ,  $f(e, h)$ , then either believe  $h$  (on the basis of  $e$ ) or don’t do anything (on the basis of  $e$ )!

But this doesn’t seem right, either. We can’t get into the details of what it means to “not do something on the basis of  $e$ ”, but I hope it’s clear that, whatever exactly it means, if I scratched my nose on the basis of  $e$ , I wouldn’t have done anything that is in violation of the norm of permission issued by (2).

In general, it seems to me, there really is a problem capturing norms of permission in imperatival terms. An imperative, however disjunctive its consequent, will require you to do something, or to refrain from doing something; but a norm of permission doesn’t say anything about anyone’s doing anything or refraining from doing anything. It just says that, under the appropriate conditions, *if* you did something, doing that thing would be OK.

## V

A second problem that I raise for the imperatival strategy asks what makes any particular imperative an *epistemic* imperative, as opposed to a moral or prudential or aesthetic imperative. On a propositional construal, the thought that we are talking about *epistemic* standards for belief can be built into the very conceptual content of the principles that constitute epistemic systems – *e epistemically* justifies *h*, we can say. But that is not an option when we are working with mere imperatives, for all imperatives look alike. So how are we to explain what makes a particular imperative epistemic, as opposed to moral or prudential or aesthetic?

Rosen develops an interesting answer to this question in terms of the *grounds* on which the imperative is accepted. While there is only one sort of imperative, there can be many different grounds for accepting an imperative. Rosen's idea is to identify certain distinctively epistemic grounds for accepting a system of rules for belief revision and then to say that a person accepts such a system *as* an epistemic system when he endorses the imperatives that it contains on those grounds. Here is the way he articulates his proposal:

Every first-order doxastic imperative of the form

If for some *e*,  $f(e, h)$ , then believe *h*

is associated with a reliability claim. This might be a simple conditional

If for some *e*,  $f(e, h)$ , then *h*....

A doxastic imperative is epistemic for a given agent when it is grounded in its corresponding reliability claim for that agent, in other words, when the agent is committed, by his acceptance of a higher-order imperative, to rejecting the doxastic imperative should he discover that the corresponding reliability claim is false. (Rosen, this issue, 20<sup>2</sup>)

It seems to me that there are at least three problems with Rosen's clever proposal. The first is that even children have epistemic systems, but I doubt very much that they accept second-order imperatives that tell them to reject certain first-order imperatives if they discover that a certain factual proposition concerning the reliability of those first-order rules is false. So it seems wrong to equate having an epistemic system with this package of first-order imperatives, second-order imperatives and reliability claims.

Second, when Rosen says that the agent is *committed*, by his acceptance of a higher-order imperative, to reject the first-order imperative should he discover that the corresponding reliability claim is false, he must mean that the agent is *rationally committed* to so doing. But this notion of rationality looks to be very close to the notion that the relativist is trying to relativize to epistemic systems; but here it is being used – in what looks to be an unqualifiedly absolutist fashion – to explicate what an epistemic system is.

Rosen can try to defend against this observation by insisting that he is only trying to rescue a relativism about epistemic rationality – the rationality of beliefs – not a relativism about practical rationality – the rationality of actions, desires and intentions. But it is not clear how much weight this distinction will bear when we are talking, as we are here, about coherence relations between first-order and second-order attitudes. (I will come back to this issue.)

Finally, it is very hard to square this account with the relativist's indispensable pluralist clause, (ER<sub>3</sub>), according to which there are no facts by virtue of which one epistemic system is more correct than any other.

If what makes an imperative of mine epistemic is that I accept it on the grounds that it delivers reliable beliefs, with a commitment to rejecting it if I discover that it doesn't, then we have a very natural notion of the correctness of an epistemic imperative. An epistemic imperative is correct if its corresponding reliability claim is true, incorrect otherwise. As a result, it is hard to see how the reflective relativist is going to stick to his pluralist clause. If I accept my epistemic system on the grounds that it delivers reliable beliefs, I am bound to hold that someone else's conflicting epistemic imperative is incorrect on the grounds that it is bound to deliver unreliable beliefs. How, then, can I coherently maintain that his epistemic system is just as correct as mine?

## VI

We turn, finally, to the problem of normativity. When Galileo says that 'My observations justify Copernicanism' he is making neither a merely psychological remark about his mental states nor a logical remark about what follows from the epistemic system he happens to accept, nor some combination of the two. He is making a *normative* claim.

However, the relativist's proposed account of what we should mean by 'E justifies H,'

According to the epistemic system C, that I happen to accept, E justifies H,

seems to get this exactly wrong – the proposed substitute looks to be a merely logico-descriptive remark about what follows from a given epistemic system and is in no way normative.

Rosen tries to fix the relativist's view by showing how it might be possible for a claim that is intrinsically non-normative to nevertheless have a normative flavor under the right circumstances. His account appeals to the following principle:

(IR) If X accepts an imperative that requires that he do A, then X has a (presumptively conclusive) reason to do A.

Rosen writes:

So here is the beginning of an answer to Boghossian's third challenge. When Galileo says 'E justifies H' the semantic content of his sentence is not a proposition at all: it is a proposition radical with a gap, which yields a sentence when that is filled by an epistemic system. His situated utterance does however convey a number of complete propositions, one of which is the proposition that E justifies H relative to the system that he (Galileo) accepts. This proposition may not be intrinsically normative. But when such a proposition is true, this fact has normative force, since it entails, in conjunction with the background norm (IR), that there is a reason for Galileo to believe that H. The remark is normative for Galileo in roughly the sense in which the remark that your prior plans require you do something would be normative for you. (Rosen, this issue, 22)

There are several problems here, it seems to me.

For the moment, let's grant (IR). Does (IR) help explain how a judgment of the form 'E justifies H' comes out saying something normative?

Rosen seems to think that it does for the following reason. According to the relativist, my saying 'E justifies H' comes to my saying

- (8) According to the epistemic system, C (the one I happen to accept) E justifies H.

Rosen is willing to admit that this is in no way a normative judgment, that it is merely a logico-descriptive claim about what follows from a particular epistemic system. He agrees with me that (to adapt one of his examples) even someone who rejected Genghis Khan's values could agree that

According to Genghis Khan's value system, it is permissible to destroy large numbers of human beings to attain one's political goals.

But he thinks that asserting (8) in certain contexts could have "normative force." To see what he means, suppose that I assert (8) in a context in which I actually accept C and suppose that what (8) asserts is true – C really does say that E justifies H. Then it follows from the fact that I accept C and from the fact that all of (IR), (8) and E are true, that I have reason to believe H.

But is this enough to make the assertion of (8) appropriately normative?

Rosen says that if it isn't then it "becomes quite unclear what it means for a claim to be normative. And this means that it is quite unclear what it would take to meet Boghossian's third challenge."

I find this puzzling. A really clear case of a judgment's being normative is that its content *analytically* implies an ought statement or a reason statement. And (8), we are all agreed, doesn't do that.

According to the criterion that Rosen is working with, a judgment counts as normative if, when supplemented with a genuinely normative judgment like (IR), it entails a reason attribution of the form: S has a reason to A.

But I think it's clear that that is too weak a condition – it would make most any

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judgment normative. The proposition that ‘It’s raining, along with the proposition that ‘If it’s raining, then I have reason to take an umbrella,’ entails that I have reason to take an umbrella. But it would be absurd to say that the judgment that it’s raining is normative.

So I think that, even if we were to concede IR, we don’t get a satisfying account of how epistemic judgments could be normative, on Rosen’s view.

But, of course, a more fundamental problem is that IR doesn’t seem true. It doesn’t seem right to say that merely accepting the imperative – Let me cleanse the world of all fair-haired men! – gives me any reason to cleanse the world of all the fair-haired men, however slight.

Rosen suggests a fallback position: instead of (IR) we can work with

(IR\*) One is required to see to it that (if one is committed to doing A, then one does A).

What (IR\*) effectively says is that one is required to see to it that one is practically *consistent* – that one not both adopt the imperative ‘Let me do A!’ and not do A. But this is now very far from showing that an epistemic judgment to the effect that

Galileo’s observations justify Copernicanism

is a normative judgment, or has “normative force” when it is uttered under the right circumstances. All that (IR\*) gives you is that, if you are in the business of adopting epistemic imperatives, you shouldn’t both endorse them and not act on them. But that’s consistent with your *never* acting on them (assuming we can make sense of that) choosing always to give them up instead.

## VII

Rosen writes:

So far we have been trying to meet the normativity requirement by identifying reasons or requirements that derive from the agent’s *ur*-commitment to a system of epistemic imperatives. The reasons we have identified are all in one sense practical, since they are grounded in intention-like states. Moreover the general principles that generate them are (for all we’ve said) absolute, non-relative norms governing compliance with such commitments. The epistemic relativist is not barred from appealing to such principles: the *epistemic* relativist need not be a relativist in other areas. But it might be said that this is not in the spirit of the view. (Rosen, this issue, 24)

I think that Rosen is right to worry about whether his strategy – which involves an appeal to absolute, non-relative practical norms – for defending the epistemic relativist is in the right spirit to accomplish the task. There are two possible worries here.

First, there is the fact that one of the most powerful arguments for epistemic

relativism derives from the metaphysical worry about whether there could be absolute normative facts somehow built into the fabric of the universe. If such a worry were justified, it would be equally justified for practical as for epistemic norms.

Second, Rosen's putative relativist is especially badly placed to make this distinction, since, according to that character, epistemic norms just *are* practical imperatives held on certain grounds.

All of this gives one reasons for trying to see if one can defend epistemic relativism without relying on an absolutism about practical reasons. Rosen tries to do this by experimenting with the thought that a statement of the form

E justifies H

always expresses some essentially first-personal thought of the form

(9) E justifies H relative to the system that *I* accept,

as opposed to something more proposition-like

(10) E justifies H relative to the system C,

where C is the system that the speaker happens to accept.

Rosen imagines the relativist conceding that thoughts of this latter form are non-normative while insisting that their first-personal counterparts are normative – anyone who acknowledges a first-personal thought of the form (9), he says, will find its normative “force” inescapable.

There are two problems with this suggestion. First, it is very implausible that when Galileo says that

Copernicanism is justified.

he is saying something so essentially first-personal that it is not possible for Bellarmine either to repeat it or disagree with it. That seems to me a decisive objection to the view on offer.

Second, for reasons related to ones that we have already had occasion to rehearse, it isn't at all obvious that (9) is any more normative than (10). If I were to say to someone,

That we should cleanse the globe of all fair-haired men follows from premises that I accept.

it would be perfectly legitimate for my interlocutor to say: That gives you no reason to do such a dastardly thing; perhaps you should reconsider the premises that you accept.

VIII

Rosen has explored a number of searching and interesting strategies for stabilizing epistemic relativism against the critique of it that I mounted in *Fear*. However, I don't believe that the strategies he proposes work.

REPLY TO NETA

IX

In his contribution, Ram Neta does three distinct things. In its first section, he raises a question about what the overall target of *Fear of Knowledge* is. In its second section, he tries, like Rosen, to rebut my arguments against the view I call epistemic relativism. And, in the final section of his paper, he formulates a view which he also dubs "epistemic relativism," but which he recognizes to be distinct from the view I criticize, and briefly sketches an argument for it.

I will say nothing in this paper about this final section of Neta's paper. Suffice it to note that Neta's case, if it worked, would be at best an argument for what, in the book, I call a version of *absolutist relativism*, rather than for a version of the view that concerns me, *thoroughgoing relativism about epistemic facts*. (See Boghossian 2006, 94n5 for more discussion.)

I also won't say very much about Neta's questions about how exactly to locate the overall target of *Fear*. In the opening pages of that book, I formulate a doctrine I call

*Equal Validity*: There are many radically different, yet "equally valid," ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them.

Neta professes not to understand what this means. Most of his puzzlement relies on ignoring something I say explicitly: that by "science" I mean a set of methods – e.g. induction, deduction and inference to the best explanation – that characterize not only scientific activity strictly so-called, but also our ordinary ways of knowing the world (Boghossian 2006, 4). So, ordinary ways of knowing and science are not examples of the "radically different" ways of knowing that I had in mind.

I think the intuitive content of Equal Validity is clear enough. It is the idea that there are many different, incompatible ways of forming beliefs that are nonetheless "equally valid" in some sense that is to be explained. Of course, many subtle distinctions and qualifications are called for before one can fully say what that means or embark on a serious evaluation of it and that is why I included on page 5 a

Footnote to the wary reader: In the interest of setting up the issues that will concern me, I am moving rather quickly over some tricky terrain. Important distinctions and qualifications will be introduced below.

I will concentrate, instead, on Neta's attempts to rebut my arguments against epistemic relativism in chapter 6. Neta's strategy for rebutting those arguments is very different

from Rosen's. Both he and Rosen accept my characterization of epistemic relativism; in particular, they both agree that, for the relativist, the judgment

(11) E justifies belief B<sup>3</sup>

can never be simply true; rather, the only truths there are in the vicinity are truths of the form:

(12) According to epistemic system C, E justifies belief B.

As we have just seen, Rosen tries to devise a package of answers to the questions:

- (a) What is an epistemic system?
- (b) What is it for an epistemic claim to be true or false relative to such a system?

and

(c) What is it for a person to accept an epistemic system?

that will yield a coherent (even if not necessarily plausible) position for the epistemic relativist to occupy. His strategy rests on construing epistemic systems as made up out of *incomplete*, hence *untrue*, general propositions that are themselves of the form (Rosen, this issue). This strategy raises, as we have seen, a number of problems, among them the acceptance problem: how could the relativist reflectively *accept* one of these epistemic systems to the exclusion of alternatives, given that he believes them to be composed of untrue incomplete propositions?

Neta's strategy for resolving this problem differs markedly from Rosen's. His strategy is to find a way of thinking of epistemic systems that will see them as composed of *true* propositions, even while respecting the epistemic relativist's basic commitment to there being no absolute epistemic truths about what justifies what. How does he propose to do that? Here is what he says:

But what is the epistemic system C to which judgments [such as (12)] refer? It is a set of general propositions of the form *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S, accept, if an agent is in informational state E, then that agent is justified in belief B*. Each element of C, therefore, refers to that very set C of which it is an element. And furthermore, each particular epistemic judgment that is implied by elements of C itself refers to that very same set C. (Neta, this issue, 37)

On the view that Neta is putting forward, then, if S says

(13) Galileo's observations justify Copernicanism.

what he must mean, if his judgment is to have any prospect of being true, is something like:

- (14) According to THIS very epistemic system, if an agent is in informational state E, then that agent is justified in believing B, and from this it follows that Galileo's observations justify belief in Copernicanism.

The clever idea that Neta is appealing to is that a judgment of the form

- (15) According to this very judgment: p

is both guaranteed to be true, since it is self-verifying, but also not to involve a commitment to the absolute truth of p, since all it is claiming is that, according to it, p. As a result, there can be no acceptance problem for a relativist who construes epistemic systems in this way, the components of such systems would be true, but also no violation of the spirit of relativism, since there is no commitment to the absolute truth of p.

Furthermore, since the principles that compose epistemic systems are complete, truth-evaluable (indeed, true) propositions, there can also be no entailment problem. So it looks as though we are well on our way to formulating a coherent doctrine of epistemic relativism.

According to Neta, the only residual problem that such an account faces is the normativity problem: How could judging an instance of (14) have normative force, as it clearly must do, if it is to substitute for an ordinary epistemic judgment like (13)?

Neta doesn't give a direct answer to this question. Instead, he argues as follows. He defines a doctrine he dubs "grammatical relativism" which he formulates in a way that is directly analogous to his preferred self-referential version of epistemic relativism. This doctrine of grammatical relativism, he claims, is obviously true. It is also true that judgments of grammaticality-in-L have normative force for the speakers of L. Hence, there *must* be a solution to how it is that propositions of the form of (14) have normative force, even if we are currently unable to say how.

## X

Let us allow for present purposes that we understand judgments of the form:

- (15) According to this very judgment: p.

And let us allow that any such judgment is true (indeed, presumably, knowable a priori to be true). Let us also allow that to make such a judgment is not to commit oneself to the absolute truth of p, but only to the claim that, according to this very judgment itself, p. Finally, let us go along with the claim that epistemic systems may be thought of as composed of such judgments.

Now, since we are dealing with true propositions, we don't face the problem of saying what the acceptance of an epistemic system could be. We can just take the acceptance of an epistemic system to be the acceptance of its propositions as true.

But the puzzle now is to explain why someone will accept *only one* of these epistemic systems; why wouldn't he accept them *all*?

After all, the judgment that

According to THIS very judgment, being in E justifies belief B

is just as true as

According to THIS very judgment, being in E does not justify belief B

which is itself just as true as

According to THIS very judgment, belief in p and belief in not-p are both justified.

The point is that the clever self-referential device with which Neta seeks to get epistemic systems that are composed of true yet non-absolute “epistemic” propositions works on any proposition whatsoever, leaving it a mystery how one could accept just one of these epistemic systems to the exclusion of the others. Properly understood, (and putting aside irrelevant facts about the finiteness of our storage capacities), each and every one of these propositions should be accepted since they are all true.

On Rosen’s view, the puzzle is to explain why anyone would accept any epistemic system, given that epistemic systems are said to consist in incomplete proposition fragments; on Neta’s view, the puzzle is the inverse: to explain why someone wouldn’t have to accept all possible epistemic systems, given that epistemic systems are said to consist in self-referential, self-verifying judgments of the form: according to this very judgment, p.

## XI

Neta seems to think that he has a *guarantee* that no such problem could be fatal to epistemic relativism, as he defines it, because he holds that his brand of self-referential epistemic relativism is modeled on the doctrine that he calls “grammatical relativism,” and this latter doctrine, he says, is obviously true. So there simply could not be a problem of coherence for self-referential epistemic relativism, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

Is there any other explanatory problem that could beset grammatical relativism? Even if there is such a problem (and I cannot think of one), it is obviously not fatal to grammatical relativism, since grammatical relativism is obviously true. (Neta, this issue, 40)

What is this ironclad doctrine? Neta defines it as follows:

A. There are no absolute facts about which phonetic strings (i.e., sequences of phones) are grammatical. (Grammatical non-absolutism)

B. If a person, T’s, grammatical judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his utterances of the form ‘string S is grammatical’ as expressing the claim

*phonetic string S is grammatical* but rather as expressing the claim: *According to THIS grammatical system, phonetic string S is grammatical.* (Grammatical relationism)

C: There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative grammatical systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these [grammatical systems]<sup>4</sup> is more correct than any of the others. (Grammatical pluralism)

Far from finding this doctrine ironclad, I don't even find it intelligible.

First, I don't see how one can talk about the grammaticality of *phonetic* (as opposed to *phonological*) strings. A phonetic string is just a string of sounds acoustically characterized. Under the appropriate circumstances, a given phonetic string could be the realization of a particular phonological string, a string that could be said to belong to some dialect. Under other circumstances, it might be the realization of another phonological string, one belonging to a distinct dialect. These phonological strings could be said to be either grammatical or not depending on the dialect to which they belong. But this is not relativism in the sense which concerns us because those facts about grammaticality *individuate* the dialects in question: what it is to *be* a given dialect is constitutively given by which of the phonological strings that belong to it are grammatical.

Neta realizes this and so insists that his "grammatical relativism" concerns *phonetic* strings and not phonological strings. But I am not aware that it makes sense to talk about the grammaticality of phonetic strings. A phonetic string as such is not part of any language; it is just a string of sounds with particular acoustical properties. Phonetic strings as such cannot be assessed for grammaticality.

Consider an analogy. Suppose my hand physically causes a piece of wood to move from point A in space to point B. And suppose we ask: Was that a valid move?

The right answer isn't: Well, there are no absolute facts about whether certain physical motions are or are not valid. Rather, there are only relative facts: relative to one game, the motion may be valid; relative to another game it may not.

The right response is to say, rather: A physical motion as such is not subject to assessment as valid or invalid – only something that's a *move in a game* is. And a game is individuated partly by which moves are valid within it.

Second, and putting this point to one side, Neta does nothing to justify his claim that his special brand of relativism about the grammaticality of phonetic strings has to be understood in his preferred self-referential way, a way that, I have argued, faces insuperable problems. He just assumes that it would have to take that form.

He also suggests that solving those problems will be everyone's problem since he takes them to be equivalent to solving the Kripke/Wittgenstein problem about rule following. But this conflates distinct issues. The Kripke/Wittgenstein problem is a problem about what it could be for someone to be following one imperative as opposed to another. That notion is being taken for granted in the present discussion.

## XII

We are familiar with relativistic theses that are not only true but also among the most important accomplishments of all time – relativistic theses about motion, mass and simultaneity. The relativistic theses about the normative domain that interest philosophers are very different from these familiar and important relativisms drawn from physics.

Unlike the relativistic theses from physics, normative relativisms involve relativization not to frames of reference but to something like *our standards*, standards that we have to be able to think of ourselves as endorsing or accepting. Thus, moral facts are to be relativized to moral standards and epistemic facts to epistemic standards.

But a moral standard in this sense would appear to be just a general moral proposition and an epistemic standard just a general epistemic proposition. Pulling off either relativism, then, requires not just relativizing the facts in the domain in question to the relevant standards; it requires taking a non-absolutist view of the standards themselves. Otherwise a commitment to absolute truths in the domain in question will show up in one's attitude towards the standards themselves. But it is very hard to see how to take a genuinely non-absolutist attitude towards the standards themselves.

That, in essence, is the difficulty for a relativistic view of a normative domain that I try to develop in Chapter 6 of *Fear*. Rosen and Neta come up with ingenious ways of attempting to circumvent that difficulty. But I don't believe they succeed.<sup>5</sup>

## REFERENCE

**Boghossian, Paul.** 2006. *Fear of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## NOTES

- 1 Editor's Note: the forms of the sentences are slightly altered from Rosen's to fit the discussion in this article.
- 2 Rosen somewhat mischaracterizes my argumentative strategy here, but not in ways that ultimately affect his arguments. He thinks that the imperativ strategy is brought in as an auxiliary to the incomplete propositions option, rather than constituting an option all its own – but it will be possible to work around this.
- 3 I switch to Neta's preferred notation.
- 4 Neta's text says "dialects" but I take it that that is a typo.
- 5 For valuable comments I am grateful to Fred Schmitt and David Velleman.

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